

The Institute of Beasts,
Strategies of doubt and refusal in a contemporary art practice

Steve Dutton

Working, as I do, at the interstices of art, art research, teaching, creative practice, writing and curation, I hope that it might be in the spirit of this conference to take a look at some of the issues arising out of a question about what it means to speak from those multiple perspectives, or more specifically, to try to speak out of the dual demands of the educational institutions of art which are split down the middle in an ontological tug of war between art-creative practice on the one hand and research as a contribution to knowledge on the other.

There has of course been much discussion and activity around precisely this situation, certainly publications like Stephen Maldorf's 'Art School', the 'Educational turn in Curating' as identified by Irit Rogoff and Anton Vidolkes United Nations Plaza project, have been squaring up to the question of whether we can 'teach art' at all within the institutions of knowledge, but for the purpose of this presentation, I want to try look at things from a slightly different perspective. That is, to work with the art's *work* at the centre and to try to think how that work can affect our relationship to knowledge as opposed to how knowledge help us to think about art.

Within the co-joined yet possibly contradictory forces and cultures of education, creative practices and art, (and in fact, where we are located right now), there are complex dialectical relationships at work, which, in effect, may totally neutralize each other, leaving art, education and creativity, the poorer.

I want to use this predicament, a set of doubts, conflicts, or plight, if you like, as a model, from which I might be able to speak about something, and make something as an artist, because, it is my guess that the implications of this predicament affect an understanding of what we, as in artists and educators, might even mean by the increasingly conflated terms of art and creativity and knowledge, as epitomized by the schizoid behaviours of art school institution.

My own practice as an artist within the collaboration of Dutton and Swindells and our Project, "The Institute of Beasts" addresses some of the issues. At the heart of this project is a question about the relationship between art, creativity and knowledge as defined within the Institution, informed by an at-the-coalface doubt around what I increasingly see as the skewing and reduction of art practice by the demands of research, innovation, consumable creativity and the knowledge-based economy.

The collaboration works to foster complex and flexible interpretations and experiences. Through our work we traverse rhetorical devices and tropes, materialities, technologies, modes of production and strategic interventions. We struggle to assimilate our work and our perception of the world into a manageable whole, and this is precisely its point. In this sense we tacitly suggest or invoke a realm within which doubt, reticence and inconclusiveness may be privileged over certain forms of knowledge; a critical sentiment which lies at the centre of all of our work.

Our most recent project, "The Stag and Hound" at PSL in the UK prioritised a sense of 'drift' from one approach or position to the next, manifested in the work through unruly 'groupings' and confluences of ideas and objects. The Stag and Hound was a call for an adjustment in a continuous way of being that is able to manifest itself visually, technically, materially, emotionally and ultimately artistically. In this sense a wandering mind possesses its own sense of depth, its own sense of putting things together to make a heterogenic space in the world.

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I have sub-titled the presentation, 'Strategies of doubt and refusal in a contemporary art practice', but I think that may be a little misleading. I am avoiding a Marcusean sense of theorizing and prioritizing the radical nature of negation as a political act, at least an overtly political act, believing that it may have run into the sand..to use JJ Charlesworth's expression, preferring to explore some of the tactics and strategies which might be used as an artist working within the formal institution, which may indeed include negating strategies.

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As a way of setting a broader context there has recently been a slightly heated exchange in the pages of one of the UK's most established art magazines about the value of Phd's and research degrees in Art Schools which might help to illustrate my point.

Peter Suchin's article 'Rebel without a course' [\[1\]](#) articulates the age old question of whether art can be taught but also echoes concerns which I suspect are endemic within the art school about the institutionalisation and instrumentalising of art practice and what Mel Ramsden described in Art-Language(new series No 3. Sept 1999) as " the delusions of professionalism".

Suchin goes on to cite a number of key texts which concern art and research within the institutions of art and expresses a kind of distrust of artists who feel they need institutional validation, for example via a Phd.

He indicates his position by using a citation from Patricia Bickers who states that "I am not opposed to PhD'd in Fine Art per se", but that "in order to fulfill the criteria for a research-degree in any meaningful way, the fine art researcher will almost inevitably be drawn away from meaningful practice". The upshot being that meaningful research is miles apart from meaningful (creative) practice and vice versa.

What Suchin is keen to point out is that 'the danger of submitting one's practice to the bureaucratic and critical scrutiny of an academic institution' will "distort or radically re-inscribe the candidates practice."[\[2\]](#)

The UK is currently seeing an increase in the idea, or at least the promise of, the independent art school. In the same issue of Art Monthly J.J. Charlesworth states that 'the newly formed independent art (teaching) organisations might be places where the culture of art could actually be changed- away from the dead hand of administration, £150K plus bureaucrats and philistine government instrumentalism," and that only by " taking up responsibility for producing our own institutions' can we "point to the possibility of producing society for ourselves"[\[3\]](#)

At stake in these exchanges is a question of asking how artists can

steer clear of the 'stifling' effects of the institution of art while still being housed within it and affecting change at the same time. Its not a new question, nor is it simply a self-serving one, although as an artists/academic it clearly has significance for a number of us here. It is clear from Charlesworth's point that it has a far wider political and societal dimension too in 'producing society for ourselves'.

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Suchin goes onto say art produced through the institutions "looks like art, preferably a saleable object, something overt, pseudo-notorious if possible- and reeking (interesting word) of apparent independence and individuality when in fact it is tightly prescribed by market-complicit models of comprehensible creativity" and it is probably this notion of 'comprehensible creativity' , or more precisely its antonym, incomprehensible or unintelligible creativity, which I want to prioritise .

Where is the place for the *incomprehensible creativity* within our institutions of art and knowledge?

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Since our collaborative practice began in 1998 we (the collaboration of Dutton and Swindells) have been interrogating images, objects and texts through processes of minor negative disruption, ambiguity and play rather than producing a positive affirmative expansion of conclusions and meaning. It's a project which possibly has a nihilistic bent but we see this nihilism as a force of doubt and disturbance to the over commodification of art and creativity which pervades our art institutions.

A while back, through the course of a residency we found ourselves and our thoughts and instincts veering wildly from one day to the next. This sense of confusion led us to imagine an 'institute' within which separate 'departments' could designed temporarily to house what we thought of as these 'errant' thoughts. In its first incarnation it was a playful method of ordering what was

totally anarchic.

As we moved on however, our departments soon began to slide back into each other, as though the 'natural' state was complexity and ambiguity. The more we tried to act as pseudo-bureaucrats managing our practice, to order our 'institute', the more the practice rebelled becoming a form of conceptual sit-in of our own unruly behaviours.

It became clear that this constant re-blurring of 'categories' was not a means of deliberate obfuscation, it was something that happening through *practice* as opposed to through theory and was a stark reminder to us of the mutability of knowledge and also an attempt to present back to the world the *aesthetic* dimensions which could be constructed and produced out of the dynamics and tensions of the breaks, failures and fissures of these so-called categories and 'departments'.

To us that this effective 'collage' of approaches, tactics, u-turns, refusals images, texts and sounds became an aesthetic/epistemological force all by itself and one which could have affect.

The aim of our *Institute* and of the collaboration is then, aimlessness. Our Institute is in effect an anti- institute.

The Institute of Beasts acknowledges waywardness, complexity and polysemy as key factors in its development. Our Institute recognizes that we are constructed out of multiple viewpoints and potentials and that the taxonomies and systems which are in place within our formal institutions of art and knowledge are overly simplistic, instrumental, overly bureaucratic, and prone to the fetishisation of clarity and progress.

Our Institute reflects our concern that our current institutions are producing us, rather than the other way round and that they have little relationship to the realities, we, and many others, our students and colleagues, experience on a daily basis, nor do they reflect the multiple selves we are having to perform in our every day lives.

In 'Smuggling-an embodied criticality'[\[4\]](#) Irit Rogoff spells it out.

“The subjects and the forms we have inherited neither accommodate the complex realities we are trying to live out, nor the ever more attenuated ways we have of dealing with them”.

The Institute of Beasts prefers to focus on the disruptive strategies, and processes, or perhaps anti-strategies of doubling, suspension, appropriation, multiple association, reversal, repetition, rather than the objects, images and texts which are produced by it but we acknowledge the need to invest each ‘work’ with a balance of objecthood and event, in which neither could take priority as it is this lack of priority which challenges to the nature of our Institute.

The Institute enables us to produce artwork which at its heart creates propositions about impossibility and contradiction, the success and/or failure of 'progress' and 'knowledge' and an acknowledgment of the slippery potentials of art.

Our Institute is always under threat by the forms it produces

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This schism between wild and tame is often described by both staff and students within the “art school” for example as the tension created between ‘art’ on the one hand and the demands of ‘research’ and a contribution to knowledge on the other. Its a romantic divide but as Suchin concedes there may be something in it. As he suggests , “ it is plausible to think of artists as people engaged in the expansion and investigation of conventional modes of representation- activities that are not neatly classifiable, not validated by bureaucratic, managerial notions of what art is or should be”.[\[5\]](#)

Research and knowledge demand a question and an argument and an answer. One must develop a structure, an argument and utilize a taxonomy as a way of locating the various pieces of knowledge, to which it is possible to refer, in the process of attempting to answer the question. But once an argument has been developed, because you’re back in dialectics and language and lists, because you are in the domain of knowledge, you’ve lost your possibility of something else happening.

In this sense, art does not ask questions, indeed Thierry de Duve, tells us that art responds to questions that are yet to be asked. i.e. it proceeds in advance of questions and Deleuze however reminds us (see Rob Garnet 126 gest) that “art emerges not out of discursive formations but that ‘pre-linguistic signs- blocks of sensation, affects and percepts form the basis of art’s ‘becoming thought’ and constitute for philosophy the ‘food for thought- whose work is to extract and give forms to the concepts implied in art’s ideas’.” (citation needed)

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At the heart of these questions are issues around the relationship between art and research, the possibility or impossibility of art within the contexts of the contemporary art/educational institution and art school and the possibility of creating and sustaining an art practice which refuses to align itself to any one canon, manifesto, school, industry, form, institution or critical method.

Rogoff argues for a contingent knowledge which is constantly renewing itself. In a collaborative text in which she collaborates with British theorist Simon Harvey and Turkish Artist Ergin Cavulsoglu she understands their work as “vehicles for the production of new subjects in the world”^[6] and she argues crucially (amongst other insights) that there has been “a reflective shift, from the analytical to the performative of observation and participation, we can” she says , “agree that meaning is not excavated for, but rather that it takes place, in the present”^[7]

And later in the same article Rogoff suggests a very plausible account of a ‘criticality’ as a “state of duality in which one is at one and the same time both empowered and disempowered, knowing and unknowing” and as a “mode of embodiment, a state from which one cannot exit or gain critical distance, but which rather marries our knowledge and our experience in ways that are not complimentary”^[8], which then in effect comes to be not about resolution of a problem, but about our ‘inhabitation’ of it, something I suspect that some art can do very well.

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There are indeed a number of similarly titled artists projects to ours

cropping up all over. Inga Zimprich's 'The Faculty of Invisibility' [9] for example, which consists of Departments of Doubt, Common spaces, and Haunting amongst others, or The Agency of Unrealised Projects[10], or the pseudo 'research department of "The Department of Wrong Answers"[11], to name a few.

It would appear that there maybe a method of attempting to work within the institutional limitations as described by Suchin by trying to invent or re-imagine the institution from the inside and thus produce the institution for oneself. Thus, our own development of a project, our anti-institute (which, for what its worth was on the scene well before any of the others listed above) was at its heart a way of acknowledging the impossibility and severe creative limitations of institutional bureaucracies, by suggesting an Institute consisting entirely of unruly, errant, unknowable and *wild* thoughts which were paradoxically impossible to house in departments, our Institute was asking to be understood as performative paradox and as a means of thinking complexity and heterogeneity as opposed to homogeneity and singularity.

So, thinking in terms of this *inhabitation* of the problem, it starts to become clear why a number of artists would begin think in terms of departments, institutions, agencies and so on. Its not a case of if you can't beat 'em join 'em, or biting the hand that feeds, but maybe it is a case of aping the structures which are so powerful in a jester-like play and performance of impossibility.

This negating of power by aping the structures of power effectively renders the power obsolete and this obsolescence is another example of a negative strategy of affective doubt.

What begins to emerge, I hope, is that our Institute is an other approach, not so much in terms of the production of objects of knowledge, information, or empowerment, but in terms of the production of behaviours, ducking and diving, negative strategies and tactics, refusals, inversions and mistakes, to recognise that within creative practice, we may indeed be able to develop creative incomprehensible strategies for 'producing society' and producing ourselves.

Our instincts as artists is always to collage and mash up, to sift and seek out serendipities and play with structures and forms, openly and ‘creatively’ be they rhetorical, material, or conceptual, in order that, new meanings, as opposed to immanent, meanings could proliferate

This implication, that we are interested in meaning creation as much as meaning location/excavation, seems to be the polar opposite of current drive of the critical, research based institution.

Conclusions

To conclude. I’m aware of a risk of solipsism here, but if our institutions of art and knowledge are seriously unable to ‘accommodate’ the work of art, (by which I mean art’s *work* as opposed to the ‘work-of-art’), if our institutions can’t become more a little bit more creative and flexible in themselves, then creativity, as a consequence of it the mastery of knowledge, will become defined by its negative limitations, as in Paul Virillio’s expanding sphere of knowledge, in which as the balloon of knowledge grows and grows, so too does the surface area between the known and the unknown.

Speaking from a UK perspective where we are subject to endless hyperbole around instrumental objectives of the so-called creative industries, creativity as a ‘thing’ is being bought wholesale by the instrumental objectives of capitalism; it is creativity which is under threat, not just art.

Some forms of practice may have a potential to help enable a continual negotiations of the yes’s, the no’s which are rightly crucial to the production of knowledge, but also I would suggest that an art/creative practice may be one of the few places for the production of maybe’s and perhaps even ‘other’ options to ‘knowledge’ as we now know it..

To paraphrase John Carey [\[12\]](#)

We should “celebrate literatures (art’s) instinctiveness, ambiguity, polysemy, indeterminacy, the capacity of a poetic language to generate an inexhaustible supply of meanings” and until our institutions of art and education are able to match up these ideals

we are doing a disservice to knowledge, art, education and creativity all in one go.

The issue is not about new knowledge per se but about the institutional production of a new unconscious.

Steve Dutton May 25th, 2011
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- [1] Art Monthly April 2011 no 345 p 11-14
- [2] ibid p 13
- [3] ibid letter p.16
- [4] E-flux journal 08-2006
- [5] Art Monthly April 2011 no 345 p 13
- [6] ibid
- [7] ibid
- [8] ibid
- [9] <http://facultyofinvisibility.tinka.cc/>
- [10] <http://www.e-flux.com/shows/view/9591>
- [11] <http://www.wysingartscentre.org/about/press/151.html>
- [12] "What good are the arts"